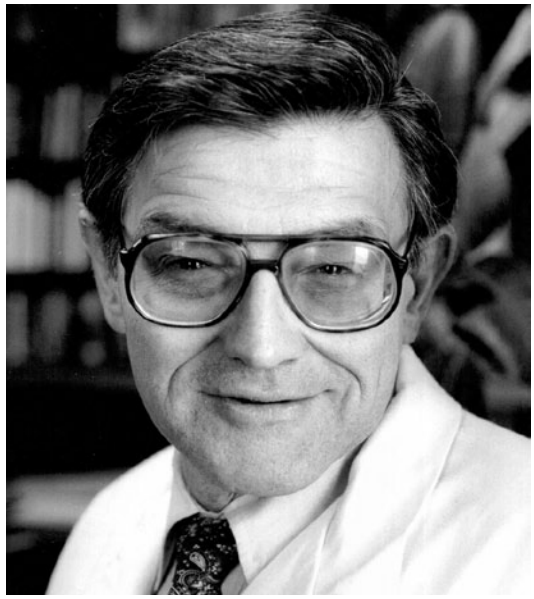
Leonard C. Harber (1927–2014)

Leonard C. Harber was born on 22 June 1927 in New York City and died at home there on 12 October 2014. He was an active member and participant in the activities of the Society for Investigative Dermatology throughout his career and served as its president in 1982–1983. At the time of his death, he was the Richard and Mildred Rhodebeck Professor Emeritus of Dermatology at the Columbia University Medical Center in New York. He received the AB degree from Johns Hopkins University in 1949 and the MD degree (1953) as well as two MS degrees (1956 and 1959) from New York University.

Len firmly believed in scholarship and the importance of obtaining the most rigorous training in the best of places under the guidance of leaders in their field. He became one of the most prominent dermatologic photobiologists of his generation, an interest that was sparked by a Fulbright Scholarship (1956–1957) at the Finsen Institute in Copenhagen—named for Niels Finsen, who pioneered the use of UV light for treating human skin diseases. It was there that Len began his research career dedicated to the study of photobiology and phototherapy. From 1957 to 1959, he was a senior resident in the department of dermatology at the Skin and Cancer Unit of New York University; he thereafter joined its faculty until moving to Columbia University, where he served as professor and chair of the department of dermatology from 1973 to 1988. He was a gifted and charismatic physician–scientist who trained numerous residents and fellows who have gone on to successful careers worldwide.

During his career at NYU and Columbia, Len made seminal discoveries relevant to the photochemical mechanism of photoallergic contact dermatitis to the halogenated salicylanilides, and he was one of the first investigators to show evidence for the formation of a photoantigen in these reactions. He believed UV light probably initiates tetrachlorosalicylanilide photosensitivity by free radical formation that can lead to a variety of biochemical alterations, including changes in halogen content, direct cleavage of the two rings, enzymatic hydrolysis, and facilitation of hapten–protein bonding (antigen formation). These studies were all the more remarkable in that he and his numerous gifted collaborators were able to carry out sophisticated photochemical procedures using the relatively primitive methods available at the time, opening the way to a greater understanding of the pathogenesis of photosensitivity diseases.



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In 1969, Len took a sabbatical working in the laboratory of Attallah Kappas at Rockefeller University, where he collaborated with the late Shigeru Sassa, a leading investigator working on the regulation of heme synthesis. During this time, Len gained expertise in assays for measuring heme pathway enzyme activity, as well as quantitating porphyrins in patients with cutaneous porphyria. This experience galvanized his interest in these disorders, and he went on to conduct seminal studies showing how these chemicals cause skin photosensitivity by inducing membrane lipid peroxidation.

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Furthermore, he and his collaborators, including Angelo Lamola, a truly remarkable photochemist then at the Bell Labs, and Maureen Poh-Fitzpatrick, Sergio Piomelli, Vincent DeLeo, Irene Kochevar, and Bernard Goldstein, conducted elegant studies explaining the paradoxical finding that patients with lead poisoning, despite having erythrocyte protoporphyrin levels equivalent to those of patients with erythropoietic protoporphyria, have no cutaneous photosensitivity. The answer: erythrocytes from patients with lead poisoning bind and retain their (zinc)-protoporphyrin, whereas in patents with erythropoietic protoporphyria the erythrocyte (free)-protoporphyrin rapidly diffuses into the plasma, whence it can be transported into the skin and cause the cutaneous photosensitivity characteristic of that disease.

Len was an exceedingly generous mentor and always resisted the temptation to hold onto star trainees for fear of losing them; rather, his strategy was to send them for training in rigorous research environments outside of dermatology, providing them with the support needed to help them succeed. His goal was for these trainees to bring their sophisticated skills back to dermatology, where they could be used to address problems relevant to cutaneous biology and skin disease pathogenesis.

In addition to his academic accomplishments, Len was singularly dedicated to his family, an avid fisherman, and a passionate oenophile and gourmet who traveled the world seeking out the best in food and wine. He loved life fiercely, and in one-on-one conversation he could be loquacious and verbose, but at some point he would always stop and say, "Enough about me, tell me about you." Beneath those endearing personal qualities, Len was, in the best sense of the phrase, a demanding and committed scholar as well as a passionate scientist. He read widely, thought incisively, had strong opinions, and demanded much of those around him (but never more than he demanded of himself). He was a fine clinician, and his patients admired and respected him. He was also a gifted and inspiring educator for his residents and fellows as well as for medical students. He was a particularly strong supporter of dermatologic nursing and was instrumental in guiding the leadership involved in the creation of the Dermatology Nurses Association, which over the past three decades has grown into an international organization with more than 3,000 members.

In his later years, as his eyesight failed and his health deteriorated, Len never complained and he somehow saw the bright side of things, no matter how difficult it must have been for him. His mind remained sharp and his intellectual curiosity never waned. He joined the New School's Institute for Retired Professionals, devoted to retired or semiretired people who want to participate actively in cooperative learning and instruction. For more than a decade, Len taught and took courses on topics as diverse as Shakespeare, Greek tragedy, and constitutional law. He never lost that wonderful zest for life that always made being around him a joyful experience. He was a learned man of great intellectual depth and breadth and a marvelous raconteur. Through the generosity of Len, the Harber family, and others, the Leonard C. Harber Professorship has been established at Columbia. He has left an indelible legacy to the department, to Columbia University, and to investigative dermatology.

Len is survived by his loving wife of 52 years, Rosalyn, their two sons, Steven and Jonathan, and four grandchildren.

David R. Bickers
Department of Dermatology, Columbia University, New York, New York, USA